

## Dragonshards

# Swashbuckling 101: Combat

By Keith Baker



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*Daine dived forward as the massive maul came down, shattering the flagstone where he'd been standing. The warforged titan tried to crush him underfoot, but Daine rolled beneath its legs to come up behind the huge construct. His daring maneuver bought him only scant seconds of life. The mystic seal would not open until the titan was destroyed, and the titan needed to land only one solid blow to shatter every bone in Daine's body. There was one other possibility...*

*Daine sprinted to the far end of the foundry floor. The titan charged after, crushing old bones beneath its massive feet ... exactly what Daine had counted on. Daine's dagger was next to useless against the vast bulk of the titan, but the adamantine blade could cut through steel. As the construct pounded across the chamber, Daine inhaled deeply and flung the dagger at the chain net hanging from the ceiling. His timing was perfect. The spinning blade severed only four strands, but that weakened the net just enough. It tore to pieces as the titan passed beneath it, burying the automaton under a hail of steel ore. A moment later, the massive gate creaked open.*

The introduction of the **Eberron Campaign Setting** describes the tone as "swashbuckling action and dark adventure." Sounds cool, but what does it mean? As an adventurer in Eberron, you still explore dungeons and fight monsters, the same as you would in any setting. What makes it "swashbuckling action"?

That question has several answers. Action points add a cinematic tone to an adventure but action points are a mechanism: it's up to the DM and the players to set the tone.

### Cinematic Action

When setting up a battle, imagine that it's a scene in a movie. If other people were actually watching, would they enjoy it? Would they hold their breath or fall asleep in their popcorn? In pulp action movies, there's much more to combat than:

"I move ten feet and swing at the troll. I rolled an 18."

"You missed. Joe?"

"I got a modified 20."

"That's a hit. How much damage?"

"Six points."

"It's still fighting. It hits you for seven points."

"Ouch."

Think about action scenes in your favorite movies. What can you add, as a DM or player?

The first thing to consider is the environment. Is the chamber a perfect square with no furnishings or distinguishing features? If not, is there some way you can incorporate the features of the room such as furniture, loose flagstones, or tapestries, into your action? Why flank the enemy by walking when you could swing a chain, dive through a window, or perform a cool tumble. Think about the action you are performing -- fighting defensively, using Power Attack, making a Rapid Shot -- and ask whether you can add a little color to the description. If you were writing a novel or directing a movie, you'd never just say, "I increase my AC by 3 points using Combat Expertise." You'd need an interesting way to present that information. Describe how you weave a wall of steel with your blade, warding off attacks while lashing out at your foe.

If a character hits or misses a creature, the DM can use the degree of failure to come up with an interesting description. A terrible roll may miss completely, but a close one may still draw blood or rebound off heavy armor plate.

Consider the actions of the opponent; if the target is using Dodge or Combat Expertise, work that into the description. "Lord ir'Dalin is a skilled swordsman, but he can't match your speed; even as he raises his sword into guard position, you drop beneath the parry and bury your point between his ribs."

Add color to descriptions of damage, too, based on how many hit points the target has left; if Lord ir'Dalin still has 90 hit points, that blow should barely nick his chest, but if it drops him to single-digit hit points it may have caught him squarely in the ribs.

Of course, there are limits to the amount of energy you can put into each scene. When the party fights 20 bandits, you can't relate blow-by-blow descriptions of 20 attacks. You can still add a little color; instead of saying "he attacks you," try "he growls and swings his blade," "he tries to smash your skull with his splintered club," or "she sneers and thrusts at you with her rusty sword." If you were writing a book instead of playing **D&D**, how would you describe the scene in order to maintain the interest of the reader? What makes fighting this group of bandits different from fighting a group of disciplined Darguul mercenaries?

## Colorful Combat

Beyond the use of cinematic description, the swashbuckling tone of the setting is enhanced if players sometimes perform actions that aren't the most obvious or even the most sensible choices. In your next barfight, instead of just pulling out your sword and hitting someone, tip the table onto them! Yank the carpet out from under someone's feet. Spend a round drinking someone else's ale before returning to the fray. Scramble up a rope or tapestry instead of just climbing the stairs.

In general, if an improvised action is colorful, fun, and does not provide the player with a substantial advantage that he couldn't normally get, then he shouldn't be penalized for trying it. If there's a rope by the landing and the PC wants to swing down to confront the bad guy, that's terrific window dressing. Requiring a skill check in that situation would only penalize the player for being impulsive and creative. On the other hand, if the player is trying a maneuver that will give the PC a considerable advantage over his foe -- allowing him to attack from a flank, bypass a trap, avoid an attack of opportunity, or something similar -- then calling for a check is appropriate.

A DM can encourage this sort of action by rewarding clever, colorful actions with free bonuses. These should not be things that the party relies upon receiving; they are gifts the DM grants, not rights that the party can demand.

If a character comes up with something colorful and appropriate that adds to everyone's enjoyment of the scene, a DM could consider the following as rewards:

- A +1 bonus to some aspect of the scene, based on the nature of the action -- an increase in damage, chance to hit, or temporary AC bonus.
- A temporary decrease to the opponent's initiative. This is particularly appropriate when tipping a bar table, cutting a tapestry off the wall, etc. The action has no serious effect but slows the opponent down long enough for other members of the party to act.
- Provide the character with one action point. In most cases this can be a temporary action point that must be used before the end of the scene. If the player was especially creative, the action point could be permanent, as long as no character ever has more than  $(5 + \text{level}/2)$  action points. An action point is a significant (potentially life-saving) reward, so reserve it for clever actions that require sacrifice or risk from the character. Never, ever allow this type of award to be taken for granted.

Depending on the DM's preferred style of play, he may create situations where straightforward combat simply cannot win the day. In the brief story at the beginning of this article, the hero is hopelessly outmatched. The encounter is not meant to be resolved through combat. Although it looks like a straightforward fight, it's actually a puzzle: the character must fight defensively and stay alive long enough to spot the element that he can use to defeat the opponent. In this sort of situation, the experience reward for defeating the encounter is actually a story reward; the experience is based on the puzzle the character needed to solve, not on the CR of the creature itself.

## Action Points

As mentioned earlier, action points are a tool for enhancing combat, allowing anyone to make that critical shot or check when it really, really matters. Action points are also a way to draw the players into storytelling. The DM should always require players to justify their use of action points by describing the enhanced action in detail. Consider the player who 99% of the time just declares, "I attack the monster and roll an 18." If he wants to use an action point to enhance the roll, the DM is perfectly justified to demand a more colorful description. What makes this action so spectacular? Does the character distract his foe with a cunning move? Does he score a hit through dumb luck? Does he shift position so the sun is in his enemy's eyes? If the DM wants to hold the game to a high standard, she could rule that unless the player comes up with a good story, the action point can't be used at all!

The swashbuckling tone of **Eberron** is in your hands as both a player or DM. Action points are one tool to play with, but they're only a starting point. Add as much color as you want to your combat -- it's impossible to overdo it. The only rule that matters is: have fun!

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## About the Author

Keith Baker has been an avid fan of **Dungeons & Dragons** since grade school. His life took a dramatic turn in 2002 when he submitted the world of Eberron to the WotC Fantasy Setting Search. In addition to developing the *Eberron* Campaign Setting and *Shadows of the Last War*, he has worked for Atlas Games, Goodman Games, and Green Ronin.

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